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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the benefits of teaching literature through levels of understanding so that teachers can more quickly and efficiently determine the operational levels of individual students. The seven levels of understanding and some of the generic questions by which they can be determined are: (1) perceptual level: "What happened, when, where, and to whom?" (2) affective level: "How did you feel about a character?" (3) inferential level: "Why did the character act that way?" (4) generalization level: "What is the theme or central idea?" (5) symbolic level: "What allegorical, symbolic meaning is suggested?" (6) myth/archetype level: "What event or cultural hero does this work seem to parallel?" and (7) psycho-social level: "What kinds of people respond to this work?" (TS)

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ON TEACHING THE PROCESS OF LITERATURE: THE VARIOUS LEVELS OF UNDERSTANDING

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From the time that the study of literature became an accepted part of the secondary curriculum slightly more than 100 years ago, there has been continual controversy as to how the literature curriculum should be organized. Our lack of consensus and divergent practices have become increasingly apparent to us, to our colleagues, and to the public-at-large as we move--or are pushed--into goal or objective-based curriculums.

Many fine teachers stoutly defend teaching literature within a historical format. Some insist that the study of literature has greater impact when organized into thematic units dealing with central problems or concerns. Others advocate genre or form as a basis for sequence and selection. Psychological, sociological, and philosophical interpretation each has its proponents. The current catch-word seems to be "unique personal response".

Plausible and convincing arguments can be advanced for each point of view. Since no one approach has been able to demonstrate superiority, a common tendency has been to adopt an eclectic approach in which the teacher is more or less free to do his own thing. As the student experiences succeeding courses in literature, therefore, he has no assurance that what or how he is expected to learn will remain constant. Rather than learning how to become an independent reader and interpreter of literature, he must learn to intuit what his teacher-of-the-moment considers important. He must study the teacher as much as, and sometimes more than, the work itself.

There is a better way.

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Presumably, few teachers today would quarrel with Jerome Bruner's thesis that teachers should aim at teaching the underlying process of the discipline rather than at passive acquisition of data.[1] To become an independent learner, the student must be able to transfer the process to new data or experiences. Answers do not transfer; procedures for deriving answers do--and especially when the learner can verbally express points of similarity between new and old problems and the process by which past solutions have been derived. It is not enough that we lead students to new understandings; they must know the path by which they arrived.

There is, it seems to me, an underlying process in the study of literature. Furthermore, this process can be of real value to both students and teachers in clarifying the sequence of goals and learnings by which full understanding is achieved. Awareness of the process can help teachers to recognize student needs, to focus instruction on those needs, to select appropriate materials and activities and to assess student growth.

The process by which we understand literature begins with the recognition that meaning or understanding is something which is brought to the work by a competent reader, rather than being inherent in the work. There seems to be ample evidence in literary criticism that succeeding generations and different cultures may often arrive at differing interpretations of a literary work. The meaning inferred by a reader may even vary from the intended meaning of the author.

There is increasing evidence that the process by which we understand literature is, to some extent, culturally determined. Recent cross-cultural studies by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement have revealed detectable differences in preferred response patterns of students from different countries. These patterns of preference become more pronounced after secondary

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[1] Bruner, Jerome S., The Process of Education. Vintage Books, 1960.

schooling.[2] Presumably, the cultural values and traditional practices of teachers within the schools strongly influence the kinds of understanding which students seek from literature.

The process by which students develop literary understanding is not, therefore, a universal process. Rather, they infer the process from the kinds of responses which are expected and valued by their teachers. The kinds of questions that we ask do make a difference.

Implicit in any discussion of literary process is the recognition that understanding can occur at different levels and is dependent, to some extent, upon both the reader and the work. We would hardly expect a fifth grade student to understand Gulliver's Travels in the same way or to the same degree as his twelfth-grade counterpart. Nor would we probably try to elicit symbolic interpretations or an explication of underlying myth from a closely reasoned essay about some current social concern.

Whether the process of understanding is viewed as a continuum or as a series of stages, plateaus, or levels seems relatively unimportant. My own formulation of the various levels of understanding began some years ago after hearing Hilda Taba discuss the levels or stages of concept development. Initially, there was some difficulty in applying the model to classroom instruction, since not all levels were applicable to works specified for study, nor were all students or classes capable of attaining the more advanced levels of understanding.

From the beginning, it was apparent that each student's "operational" level was dependent upon a number of prerequisite skills and abilities, such as reading level, experiential background, facility at encoding and decoding, and previous experience in organizing and expressing logical responses.

To a considerable extent the various levels have been defined by the kinds of questions which tend to be asked about a literary work. The ordering of the

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[2]Purves, Alan. "Indoctrination in Literature," The English Journal, 63:5 (May, 1974) pp. 66-70.

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various levels were pragmatically derived through use. In other words, students seemed to be able to, and probably needed to, deal effectively with questions at any given level before they could perform effectively at a succeeding level.

The generic questions listed at each level are representative only. Any competent teacher could, I am sure, add to or adapt questions for various works of literature at any appropriate level. It is also possible that questions might be arranged under different headings to result in a still more orderly sequence.

An immediate benefit to be derived from teaching the process of literature through levels of understanding is that one can more quickly and efficiently determine the operational level of individual students. By knowing the level of understanding at which the student can operate effectively, one can more easily formulate and order discussion questions and test items, group for discussions and activities, and differentiate assignments and expectations. Teaching to the process, as formulated below, permits but does not require individualization of instruction. Some individualization will almost inevitably occur, however, as the teacher becomes more aware of the level at which each student can or cannot function effectively. The levels, and the generic questions by which they can be determined are as follows:

Levels of Understanding

I. Perceptual (Literal) Level

- What happened, when, where, to whom?
- Paraphrase the story (poem, play, etc.)
- What did _____ do?
- What does _____ mean? (word, phrase, etc.)
- Describe _____. (character, setting, situations, etc.)

II. Affective Level

- How did you feel about _____? (character, situation, etc.)
- Why did (not) you like _____?
- How do you think _____ (from story, poem, play, etc.) felt?

II. (continued)

- What mood or effect did the story (poem, play, etc.) have on you?
- What effect does that word or figure of speech have?

III. Inferential Level

- Why did _____ act that way?
- What do you think happened afterwards?
- How is _____ similar to or different from _____?
- What is the relationship between _____ and _____?
- What is the author's (speaker's, character's, etc.) attitude towards _____?

IV. Generalization (Synthesis and Evaluation) Level

- What is the theme or central idea?
- In what ways do you agree or disagree with the author?
- Why was this character, incident, etc., included?
- How accurately does this author, character, etc., portray human nature?
- Will this work stand the "test of time"?

V. Symbolic Level

- What characters, objects, events, etc., seem to represent something else ?
- What does the name _____ suggest?
- What do repeated words, motifs, image clusters, etc., signify?
- What allegorical, symbolic meaning can you suggest?
- What conscious or unconscious concerns of the author might this work sybolize?

VI. Myth/Archetype Level

- Is there an archetypal situation or character?
- What event, myth, or cultural hero does this work seem to parallel?
- What other works have dealt with the same myth or archetypal pattern?
- Why does any author, or this author, employ this particular myth or archetype?

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VI. (continued)

- What enduring human values, concerns, or characteristics are revealed through this myth?

VII. Psycho-Social Level

- What kinds of people respond to this work? Why do they respond as they do?
- In what way is this work a unique product of the author? of the cultural milieu? of the historical period?
- How might this work have been different if it had been written by _____?
- Would this work have had the same acceptance if it had been written in a different time or country? Explain.
- What subtle or long-range effect might this work have had in shaping perceptions, developing public awareness, etc., on the reading public?

There are, perhaps, additional levels or areas of omission. Over the years a number of revisions and refinements have been made, some through discovery and some through suggestions of colleagues. Although I have several times tried to re-structure the various levels to conform to the hierarchy of goals as outlined in Bloom's Taxonomy[3] every attempt has seemed to do violence to the inherent process by which students--at least my students--seemed to arrive at new levels of understanding.

There are, of course, difficulties. The most common occurs when class or group discussions generate questions at different levels. Ideally, each student needs to achieve understanding at a given level before attempting to move to a succeeding level. It would be a rare but delightful class, I suspect, in which all students functioned at a given level and proceeded to succeeding levels at the same rate. By focusing upon the process of understanding, however, teachers can quickly become adept at grouping according to operational levels, individualizing activities and

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[3]Bloom, Benjamin S., editor. Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Handbook I: Cognitive Domain. David McKay Co. 1956.

discussion questions, and accurately assessing student growth.

As suggested previously, it is especially important that the student be aware of the process. At least some discussion should occur as to how one "learns" literature. Usually students are quick to perceive that there are different levels of understanding and that there is an inherent order or sequence leading to further understanding. Through occasional restatement, perception checks, paraphrasing, and summation, one can easily maintain and monitor student awareness of the process.

Perhaps a few words should be said concerning test construction and evaluation. If objective tests are to be given, certainly a few questions should be included from each level. For those students operating at a lower level of understanding, it is probably disheartening in the extreme to be faced with questions that are irrelevant to their level of performance. On essay tests, one possibility might be to give a "graduated list" of questions containing one or two from each level, with options as to which questions the student may answer.

It is not the intent of this paper to suggest that understanding literature should be our sole aim. We would naturally try to inculcate an appreciation and value of writing that is rich in style, grace, and wit. The process for developing such appreciation or inculcating such values would properly be the topic of a different paper. It seems apparent, however, that appreciation tends to be limited by one's level of understanding and that understanding, therefore, should come first.

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